



Lumen International Conference Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty (LUMEN 2013)

The Role of the Landscape in the Identity Generation Process

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Abstract

Landscape science was developed as a way of understanding and interpreting the human being in its relation with nature. Now, the concept of landscape is related to the social and cultural dynamics of daily environment. The present moment is a complex mixture of political, cultural, social relationships, influenced by demographic explosion, urbanization without limits, the extinction of natural resources and the emergence of an ecological mass consciousness.

This paper wants to debate the importance of the landscape – natural or anthropogenic, in the process of establishing an identity in the context of globalization and cultural homogeneity.

In a time when physical contacts are replaced by virtual contacts, communication is overused until it loses the value of the concept itself, making room for superficiality. In a word of mobility, dematerialization, communication, identity and character are essential. Identity is generated by that quality of a certain space which, through the natural or anthropogenic configuration it has, makes the individual aware of the place where he lives, giving him a sense of belonging. The nature or the urban landscape often offered significant elements that have been assimilated by the community, who frequently identified with them. Currently, the notion of landscape becomes ambiguous, complicated by the overlapping between different structures, images and various features that are often opposing from the point of view of typology. The resulting landscape is characterized by multiplicity, variety and structural and spatial discontinuity. There is a need for significant images, for a spatial identity that may become representative for society. The existing landscape – sometimes lacking form and incoherent - needs to regain its identity by reinventing itself. Spatial coherence is an essential condition for building a local character and an identity in the context of the current informational and communicational era through a “brand” – an internationally recognizable concept in the age of globalization.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Lumen Research Center in Social and Humanistic Sciences, Asociatia Lumen.

Keywords: landscape; identity; city; landmark; society

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1. About Landscape

The Landscape issue is one of the major concerns of today's society – in the context of urban development, of sustainability, of preservation and protection of natural areas.

Auguste Berque says that the landscape is a social fact, a natural, subjective and objective, material and cultural product that is real and symbolic. The term Landscape has had a series of definitions over time, being for a long time associated with the notion of picture, subject for paintings – referring as such to the view that lies before the eyes. The most recent conceptual delimitation of the term appears in the European Landscape Convention from Florence, 2000, which defines the Landscape as *an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors (part of the land, as perceived by local people or visitors, which evolves through time as a result of being acted upon by natural forces and human beings)*. The idea is that beyond the identifiable definition from the dictionary - *all the visible features of an area of land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal* (Oxford Dictionary 2013), the concept was completed with scientific and historical references: *the landscape is the expression observable through the senses, of the earth's surface, resulting from the combination between nature, technology and human culture. It is continuously changing, and it cannot be perceived otherwise but in its dynamics, the history being the fourth dimension* (Pitte 1992). The aesthetic value of the landscape must be added to these observations – based primarily on cultural values, and then on artistic sensitivity.

Basically, the landscape is composed of areas – including the overall volumetry of its components (the morphology and the spacial structure), but also the activities, the processes and the society that uses, consumes and / or dwells in that space. Therefore, depending on the typology of the elements that compose it, the landscape is natural or anthropogenic (which – depending on the degree of human intervention – can be rural or urban); in this sense multiple aspects are included and these are – physical, economic, functional, geographic, ecological, environmental, social, cultural, historical and archaeological.

The landscape is perceived and understood from the point of view of the relationship between man (society) and the space observed. The way in which humans intervene on the landscape depends primarily on the technical facilities that it holds, or has held at one time. The landscape has transformed from the unspoilt nature of the caves in which man found shelter, along with the discovery of the firsts building techniques, continuing to develop progressively throughout history. The agricultural revolution and later the industrial revolution were the impulse moments for different stages of urban development and thus for the transformation of the landscape. If, along with the agricultural revolution, the emergence of the first forms of cities gave birth to the first cityscapes, in the pre-industrial period the urban landscape is the very identity of the city. The industrial development produces urban explosion, and along with it, the transformation of the urban landscape concept.

The Urban Landscape issue arises in the context in which the city increasingly ceases to communicate with the environment. This break is encouraged also by the unprecedented technological development that satisfies most of the needs of the individual and of contemporary society. The urban landscape must become an element of continuity inside the city, providing

- historical and cultural continuity by fitting in the context and by acquiring the characteristics of the place
- the continuity of the natural element
- ensuring the aesthetic urban values

The landscape plays a very important role in the urban restructuring process; it must be seen beyond its aesthetic or decorative connotations. The landscape offers above all a complex context, with strong implications on the social, cultural and historical environment. It can become the continuity element which can ensure spatial continuity, the dialogue between the old and the new – between tradition and modernity, between the anthropogenic and the natural framework.

2. About Identity

The general urban context where the new technologies evolve, develop and are applied – specialized or not – is characterized primarily by the cultural urban heritage of the past ages. The way it represents or not an element of identity within the city depends on the society who consumes and lives in the space, of the capacity of adaptability of the space to the new needs, requirements, and aspirations. This happens because the appropriation of the space is conditioned both by the man and by the space itself. Beyond the historical value, the social value becomes extremely important, in a time when the virtual contacts take the place of the physical ones, communication represents an element that is so overused that it loses the value of the concept itself, making way for superficiality. The virtual medium increases the need for contact and physical communication, the public space and what it provides becomes more important than ever; in a world of mobility, of de-materialisation, of communication, identity and character are essential.

The information and technology revolution led to discontinuity and change, having an incomparably higher impact than any previous technological revolution, because it manifested itself on a global scale, being indifferent to geographical, economical, historical or cultural barriers. The information era offers an unprecedented opportunity for cultural development by promoting local values and initiating regional developing programs starting from this objective (Rozenholc, 2001).

Currently, urban identity is built on two powerful elements: the historical heritage (which is generally between 5% and 10% of the city territory) and the proximity of great natural areas. Between these two indisputable advantages lies the built form of the city, and the discussion on the future potential of development. (Cuillier, 2008). As it can easily be noticed, we are far from the powerful meaning given to Architecture in Antiquity and in the Renaissance, when it adhered to a site; the architectural forms transform along with it, forming a whole, establishing itself as an event. However, the existing urban form keeps in its memory the presence of many ages. The streets and the urban plazas, the heights, the depth of the perspectives, visual sequences compose the diversity of the urban space, building its character. The urban intervention involves both different spatial scales and various themes and contexts, according to different modes of interaction between tissues, spaces, communities, identities, aspirations.

Currently, mental images of global cities are rare, almost non-existent. In the global competition, branding and local marketing needs to promote the developing regions – as is the case in the region of Lyon, Zurich, Milan or Munich, looking for potential images to form their identities and to communicate them. The image of the new urban regions should be visualized as a projection of local identities at regional scale, as a hierarchy and emphasis of their meanings, according to their ability to be perceived and to the appropriation of the proposed symbols by people. (Bencseky, 2008) The most important elements in identifying an urban region or a city were always the topography of the area, the significant buildings, and the built ensembles – offering it an image. Currently, the topographic factor is often cancelled by the strong expansion in the territory; thus the urban and architectural design become extremely important as elements of connectivity and guidance in the territory, giving strength and helping to generate an identity. (Bencseky, 2008) One could argue that the existing similarity between different forms – natural and constructed – of elements or assemblies that have transformed themselves over time into iconic (or at least representative) images for certain regions, areas or cities is rather obvious. Imitation, contradiction and integration in landscape are equally important processes to confer or enhance the character of a natural or urban area.

The urban regions should develop their own personality encompassing the distinct evolution of their components. The issue arises due to the scale that characterizes the new urban entities, the notion of landscape becomes ambiguous, complicated by the superposition of different structures, of images and various features, often opposed as typology (urban / rural, natural / anthropogenic). It is in fact a succession of landscapes, specific to the relationship between man and nature, to the different ways of living in the space. The resulted landscape is characterized by multiplicity, variety, structural and spatial discontinuity. The major risk is the alienation, the loss

of the sense of belonging; it is therefore necessary to build significant images and spatial identity that can become representative for society. (Norberg Schulz, 1971) The landscape becomes responsible for giving identity, it contains the elements that give its character and, with it, the identity structure of the region should be created.

3. Landscape – cultural brand

The urban development has determined the built landscape of each era. This landscape was transmitted to the next generation together with a specific way of living. On the one hand this evolution constitutes the necessary context for further development, but at the same time it keeps the relation with the past. The urban history is a history of evolution, of change, of particular situations in which every element is a link between certain stages.

The 20th century is the beginning of the age of globalization, where the process of urbanization has gone beyond the city, generating areas characterized by impersonality and lack of identity. Pointing out some features of this process, we note that (Melissinos, 2001)

- for centuries the cities have been designed, inhabited and perceived as social and spatial wholes defined through spiritual and material limits; now their place was taken by the informal space born from an urbanization without restriction
- the streets and urban sites – reflections of community values, have been replaced by large areas modelled following functional criteria
- the harmonious form of the cities, in which the relations between buildings form the unity of urban spaces was replaced by a fragmentary system where there are no connections between buildings and groups of adjacent but independent buildings.

In these conditions it cannot be neglected that the patrimony constitutes the best guarantee of the identity of Europe's cities and regions, which include the extraordinary diversity and potential of regional heritage. In this regard, the following objectives can be outlined:

- defining a technical standard to protect the patrimonial values – that will be valid across Europe
- encouraging the development of regional cultural industries which constitute the most important elements of patrimonial potential
- formulating specific rules to prevent abuses where market forces would exploit the heritage resources only for profit
- regional mapping of Europe, to provide a strong regional identity, similar to the “brand” that can be recognized across the world
- defining the heritage as common resource, accessible to all – as public areas. (Rozenholc, 2001)

The heritage – natural or anthropogenic – is often a source of generating local or regional identity. It contains not only a part of the history of the place, but also the transcendental information which has determined the appearance of the settlements and has been expressed through local specificity. Promoting the surrounding natural landscape and introducing unique elements – attractive as image, original or manifest, become in the information age – of global culture and multi-ethnic societies – opportune ways to achieve a regional or local identity (Tour Eiffel at the time of its construction, Guggenheim Museum from Bilbao).

The result will be an overlapping of goals and objectives, having as target the constitution of an urban landscape of the era of globalization, information, communication and excessive mobility. The attractiveness represents in this period a very important feature that ensures the competitiveness in the global context. Starting from the motivations that could become representative for society (crisis periods, proposed objectives, major restructuration) and from the awareness of the context of existence and formation of urban structures (natural environment, major relief), the new urban landscape has to ensure the needs of identity and belonging. Relying on cultural and historical values, the natural and built heritage will become landmarks and points of continuity – the necessary link between tradition and modernity.

4. Conclusions

In the urban interventions developed in the last two decades, heritage proved to be the main motivation of investors and the starting point of designers, achieving this through identification, then marking and emphasizing the regional or local character (as a reaction against some negative consequences of globalization) – either through a process of restoration or revitalization of the heritage (e.g. – Emscher Park, Duisburg), or by marking areas or spaces without identity (e.g. - Bilbao, Valencia, Lyon). The aim was in all cases the restoration of urban spatial coherence, the construction of a “mosaic city”, characterized by the succession of places with certain meanings, linked in a network perceptible at the level of the urban space, forming through specificity the identity of the city. Similar to the informational technology which modifies nowadays the entire way of thinking of society, of the economic, political, social structures, the urban space takes from the Internet the applications and the linking elements – hypertext type – which – like surfing the cyberspace - facilitate the perception of the urban structure by simultaneously browsing and reading it.

In the context of the conclusions derived from the study, one could outline the idea that the urban identity in the information age depends on reshaping the urban landscape following the restructuring of the city. According to the tendencies dictated by society transformed by new emerging technologies, the new identity must be related with the urban history, with the value and the character of the places, with the specificity elements which gave birth to the establishment of the human settlements. The natural structure, the spirit of the place, the spatial coherence, the existing heritage and the architectural objects are the elements that make (together) the context of this identity creation. Overlapping the involved concepts, inserted in the real – virtual dialogue – specific to informational technology, determines the necessary features of the urban entities in this transitional period – *the competitiveness* and *the attractiveness*. The urban image, sustained by the phenomenon of capturing living space by society, becomes its mark, the local “brand”, and spatial continuity becomes an essential quality of the Urban Landscape, one that must be understood, memorized, captured.

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- Rozenholc, Anita – *Heritage in a networked society* (2001), ECC – PAT 2001 - FORWARD PLANNING: THE FUNCTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN A CHANGING EUROPE, Council of Europe, p.61 – states that „ *In the age of the “new economy” and the “information society” or, for those who mistrust such buzz-words, the digitised society, we cannot ignore the fact that culture is now at the heart of economic development while also constituting the best guarantee for the creation of a European identity that makes for a single policy embracing the assets of regional heritage in all its extraordinary diversity.*”
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